

Live and let live

Letting your property out over the winter months can keep maintenance costs down explains **Glynis Shaw**

If you own and let a property in France for summer holidays then earning some income during the off-season months is an attractive proposition. You may do well with bookings for Christmas, New Year and half-term breaks, but another option is to market your property for longer-term winter lets.

Aside from a potential year-round income, there are great advantages to having a property occupied during winter, especially if you are not on site. Firstly, a house with people living in it is much safer and more secure than an empty, deserted one. It is also less vulnerable to deterioration, damp and weather damage if it is being kept warm and aired, with any major problems immediately reported. Finally, many occupants will enjoy sunny days pottering in the garden and so may even help keep your outdoor space tidy and attractive.

Long-term lets can run from one month right up to six months. These days, the demand for spring holiday breaks has increased and so most property owners offer winter lets between November and late February or March, depending partly on the region and local weather.

The market for winter lets has traditionally been those who want to escape the British winter and they are drawn to southern regions of France for obvious reasons. It pays to remember – and be honest about – the fact that even southern areas can get cold in winter, unless you are located in Provence or towards the Spanish border. But it's also good to point out the longer hours of sunshine and the real possibility of lunch and barbecues outdoors in brightness and warmth, even if the temperature falls at night.

Other people may want to get away for a sabbatical. Perhaps they dream of writing that long-



The owners of this gîte complex in the Dordogne believe in good customer relations and so give their winter tenants free logs, homemade jam and eggs from their chickens



promised novel like Colin Firth's character in the film *Love Actually*, want to lose themselves in painting or find themselves through meditation in peaceful surroundings. Self-catering properties in quiet rural or coastal locations with attractive scenery could well appeal.

But there is another group of people who are now very active in the market for winter lets. Bob Lucy owns Mas d'en Gariste, a converted farmhouse in Thuir, and manages other properties in the Pyrénées-Orientales department of Languedoc-Roussillon, and he explains: "I now arrange winter lets for families who want to emigrate and, sensibly, want to 'try before they buy'. These families enroll their children into local French schools and really live the French life. They are also on the

ground should that special property come up – the one that's on the market one day and sold the next. Their stay in France can be a security blanket. If the experience is not all it's cracked up to be, they haven't burned their bridges and can easily return home to the UK."

In St Germain du Salembre in the Dordogne, Andy Sutherland has gone a step further. As well as running the gîte complex, La Rose de l'Isle, he is a registered *immobilier* and has integrated the two businesses by offering winter lets to property buyers while they are looking for a house, or overseeing work on a completed purchase.

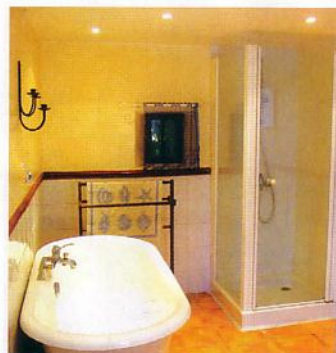
"One of the advantages of our area is that it's a part of France that isn't closed for winter. Our local town is working and buzzing all year round," explains

“ Winter lets are a good way to bring in extra income during the off-season ”

Sutherland. "The Dordogne winter can be cold but it's also very short, with lots of sunshine and crisp blue skies." Andy and his wife Margaret also believe in good marketing and customer relations and so give their winter tenants free logs, homemade jam, eggs from their chickens and even Christmas decorations. "It's a pleasure to help out our tenants and just one extra booking makes the investment worthwhile," they explain.



Comfortable, well-equipped winter lets appeal to househunters wishing to 'try before they buy'



The price is right

How much can property owners charge for winter lets? The price must be low enough to attract business. "Properties are very affordable during the off-period," says Bob Lucy. "Large, beautiful and private properties that let at £1,800 per week in the high season are available at £600-£800 per month in winter. Some of our guests let out their UK properties at a far higher rent than they're paying here in France, so they can enjoy a credit balance while experiencing real French life."

If you currently take bookings for Christmas and the New Year, bear in mind that people in search of long winter lets may want to use your property

throughout the Christmas period. You'll need to consider whether you are willing to forego that Christmas market in favour of longer-term tenants.

In general, the longer the let, the lower the price, so it pays for a property owner to agree the length of let and rent to be paid during initial negotiations.

Charging for services

Before you market your property, it is also necessary to work out how you will charge for utilities. This is more of an issue in winter, when heating is essential and people spend a lot of time indoors. It is not acceptable, for instance, to say that the rent is £100 per week plus a £20 charge for electricity. This would mean that you are selling on the electricity supplied by EDF and the company could take exception. It would also bring tax complications.

You might make an estimate of the likely cost of utilities to be used and include that figure in the rent, but this could still involve tax issues. Better to install independent meters and charge for the exact measurement of consumption. Open fires and log-burning stoves are obviously an attractive option for heating. If

you want to provide logs but not follow Andy Sutherland's example, then it is acceptable to sell these on to the tenant.

If you are concerned that a large property may be too expensive to heat and just too big for the needs of winter tenants, then consider whether it is practical to close off part of the house. Can your spacious four-bedroom property that is so cool for summer become a cosy two-bedroom unit that's economical to run in winter and perfect for a couple? Whoever your tenant, a comfortable lounge, well-equipped kitchen and quality bathroom will appeal – and one very useful piece of winter equipment is a tumble dryer. This avoids the need for damp clothes hanging in the house during wet weather, is not expensive to buy and could be a marketing asset.

When it comes to marketing your property, check whether the website through which you advertise has a special section devoted to long winter lets. It is worth paying a little extra to be listed in the relevant section and so to target enquiries for this specific market. You can state the length of the tenancy you would prefer and should include in your property listing as much detail as possible about what's on offer for winter.

This would obviously include heating arrangements and extra facilities such as that tumble dryer. Give details, too, of local activities and events during winter. Bob Lucy says: "French Christmas markets are a new experience for our winter guests, and seem to appear even more charming to them." List not only fêtes, festivals and markets but also concerts, cultural events, classes for fitness or tai chi and other local services. Tell people what they can do and where

they can visit, even for an overnight trip. In other words, make them want to be there.

It can also pay to sell yourself as a host. Andy Sutherland enjoys rugby, cooking, music and drinking local wines. Margaret is a keen gardener who enjoys flower arranging and decorating, as well as offering guests massage and reflexology, in which she is qualified. Son Jamie is a keen sportsman who really loves his rugby. The family tells potential visitors all this, making them interesting hosts and their gîtes more attractive destinations.

Images are also important selling tools. Include one or two inviting winter photographs in your listing or have them ready to email to people who enquire. Show that blazing log fire, the buzz of a local fête, the countryside on a crisp autumn day with blue skies or a steaming casserole of *boeuf bourgignon*.

When you receive enquiries, it pays to find out what guests want from their stay and be enterprising in order to help. Get to know about local schools for families, make connections with estate agents for househunters, tell people what you can do to make their stay more convenient, enjoyable or productive and help them to settle in quickly.

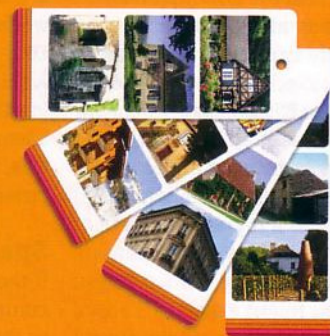
You could soon find that winter lets are bringing in an extra stream of income and ensuring that your property is aired and secure during the off-season months. □

Glynis Shaw is joint MD of French Connections
Tel: 01580 819303
Mas d'en Gariste (100434) and La Rose de l'Isle (102745) can be booked through
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